Unrest in the Middle East and North Africa: Implications for Homeland Security
U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Homeland Security
Statement by Philip Mudd, 6 April 2011

The threat from North Africa and the broader Middle East has evolved profoundly during the past 20 years, with multiple stages of violence over decades that illustrate how susceptible this region has been to unrest and the call of violent jihadists, including al-Qa'ida. The series of events include:

- The concentration of North African extremists who went to Afghanistan in the 1980s to fight the Soviets, and then the Soviet-backed Afghan regime, and who absorbed al-Qa'ida ideology during their time there;

- The return of these extremists to fuel anti-government violence, particularly in Algeria and Egypt, during the 19909s, with a parallel rise in networks that attacked in Western Europe, particularly France;

- The migration of extremists from North Africa to Iraq, where jihadists of North African origin were overrepresented among foreign fighters;

- The shift of local North African groups from local motivations and linkages to affiliation with al-Qa'ida, and its focus on Western targets, during the past decade; and

- The prospect that the extremists who come from this highly violent history will find a way to use the more recent unrest as a springboard to regain momentum they have lost during the past few years.

With this backdrop, there is no disputing that North Africa has been one of the hotbeds of violent jihad, but experts differ over whether the recent unrest will offer jihadists an opportunity or a setback. In general, I would judge that these developments are a net negative for al-Qa'ida and other jihadists who view the United States and its allies as legitimate targets for attack. To start, some of the key justifications for recruits to turn to an al-Qa'idist message have disappeared: leaders viewed as un-Islamic and corrupt are gone, and Islamists will have some sway within new governments. Youth who previously looked at bleak prospects and unresponsive regimes might see a reason to participate in this new change, and violent extremists would have little sympathy now in attacks that local populations would see as an assault on their revolutions.

Al-Qa'ida and its affiliates have come out publicly in support of these rebellious populations, but there is little doubt that they are uncomfortable with these changes. First, they have a history of well-documented animosity toward the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots, such as Hamas, and the Brotherhood most likely will have significant influence in elections and new governments. Second, al-Qa'ida is no fan of democracy. The statements of support are simply signs that the leadership of the last few decades of violent jihad cannot be seen as opposing what are so clearly popular revolutions. So they will pretend to ally with the will of the people, and bide their time.

This is not to say that violence will subside. The disarray among security services might provide an opening for a spike in criminal activity. And the history of elections in the Middle East -- Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon -- is rife with examples of political parties defined by religion and ethnicity. Similar fissures in the new, hopeful democracies may lead to the same, almost guaranteeing political violence.

Over the longer term, economics will help decide whether these countries provide opportunities resulting in growth and job creation that might mitigate the threat of restive youth. For now, the picture is not good: investment will slow with the unrest, and this slowdown might accelerate if foreign investors shy away longer term as a result of the uncertain climate. In general, these countries have high youth unemployment, low GDP growth rates, and large percentages of their populations under the age of 15. These youth probably see democracy as a rapid route to economic reform, and they may have mistaken expectations that new governments can quickly spark economic growth. If they are disappointed -- and particularly if new governments are seen as corrupt -- they may again be vulnerable to calls from extremists who will target the United States.

Western actions might influence whether these violent extremists can ever take advantage of what emerges from these revolutions. New governments will see continuation of foreign aid as a sign that the United States respects the will of voters, even as it questions the ultimate aims of some Islamists. Meanwhile, in their push for rapid job creation, new governments will look for trade benefits from Washington, again as a way to placate populations who see democracy as a panacea for profound economic problems.

We may well witness statements from some of these Islamists -- during an Egyptian electoral process -- that make us uncomfortable, such as questions about peace agreements with Israel. The emerging local, non-al-Qa'ida Islamists are unlikely, however, to contribute to the jihadist threat to the United States, at least in the short term. They are going to have to deliver at home, and quickly, on the expectations of youth. They abhor al-Qa'ida, and they will not countenance al-Qa'ida statements of support. And, as is the case with many parties when they take power, they will immediately face practical questions -- such as ensuring that they can attract foreign investment -- that prod them toward pragmatism.

Unrest in the Gulf has different dimensions. The Gulf leaders have more legitimacy than the presidents-for-life in countries such as Syria, Yemen, Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, and they have economic advantages as well. They are not immune to the wave of unrest -- Bahrain is the prime example, but Morocco, Oman, and others have also witnessed protests -- but these protests often call for reform, not revolution.

This is not to say that this year's picture is the same as next year's. These countries too have an unusually high percentage of teenagers, and these youth, like their counterparts elsewhere, are not finding jobs they think are suitable to their degrees. Over time, job creation, foreign investment, and diversification may be as important in

the Gulf as in the countries that have already gone through revolts. For now, though, the characterization of an "Arab Spring" across the Middle East is misleading: this unrest is far more focused on autocrats than on monarchs. In addition to providing opportunities, some of the future will hinge as well on how governments react to violence: the Moroccan king's subtle approach has worked well, but in other areas, the quick resort to force by security services has alienated protesters. If there are more protests, one key indicator of their longevity will be not only the legitimacy of their demands but the question of whether the Moroccan approach becomes the norm.

Our time horizons are shorter than those of al-Qa'ida and its affiliates. They think of time in terms of decades and centuries, while we tend to look at weeks, months, or a few years as significant. Our annual threat assessments in this country during the past decade, for example, have at times characterized al-Qa'ida as resurgent or on the ropes, rapid turnarounds in assessment that mask how the group views itself. A few years' pressure is not a lifetime, and the jihadists we face are both smart and resilient. So while we watch the emergence of new democracies, and inevitably turn our attention elsewhere -- a new nuclear crisis, humanitarian disasters, debates on immigration, health care reform -- we can bet that our adversaries are waiting to see if they can seize an advantage.

If we are to match the patience of jihadists, then, our reaction to this upheaval in the Middle East will require patience, and the art of the long view: supporting nascent democracies but then recoiling when elections result in political posturing that makes us uncomfortable will risk losing an opportunity with the new democrats. And withdrawing economic support might accelerate a decline that will persuade possible jihadists to lose hope. As it stands, al-Qa'ida is off-guard: so far, so good, But "so far" is just a few months at most: years of engagement, patience, and a willingness to understand that our form of democracy is not universally viewed as successful will help us ensure that, years from now, we still see these revolutions as having a positive effect on mitigating threat to the US homeland.